The Business of Life

Bob is sitting at his work counter with magnifying glasses and a soldering iron, leaning into a customer's TV set. A thin ribbon of smoke rises, as the lead solder melts into a tiny droplet, enabling an electrical connection between circuits.

A stout teenager scoots around bins of television and radio parts, making his way forward from the back of the shop. Bob looks up and sets the soldering iron aside.

"Mr. Vallejos, I have a customer who wants to know if you can get him 50 lbs. of Rosebud agate by this Thursday."

"Ah shit…by Thursday?" Bob growled. "Is it that bastard Nelson?" The kid shrugs.

"Tell him I can round up 30 lbs. by then," Bob sighed as he rubbed the bridge of his nose, "but the rest will have to wait till next week."

The kid nods and retraced his steps back through the shop.

Bob leans back on his wobbly old barstool, stretches and rubs the back of his neck. Small lumps of shrapnel keep working to the surface. He can feel them with his long, calloused fingers. He slowly stands, reaches to pull a small note pad from his back pocket, and jots down yet another task.

The shop bell rings as the door swings open, announcing another potential customer. Bob looks around to the front of his store, to see two of his sons tumble in through the door.

"Hi dad! Can we get a soda from the deli?"

A smirk creases Bob's mouth as he watches the boys smack and jab each other.

"Come here…stop that. Tell me something you learned today at school."

The younger of the boys, wriggled and made faces at his brother, declared he knew how to make change from a dollar.

"Good to know Steve, if you'd want to work as cashier at the deli someday." Dad smiled.

Steve beamed as he plowed his elbow into his big brother's ribs.

"How about you John, learn anything worthwhile?"

The older boy frowned and looked down at his feet, returning a small jab. "I

learned not to trust that shit head Freddie Silva with a secret."

Bob's eyebrows perked up, "Oh?" A sly smile preceded the question, "Was it animal, vegetable or mineral?"

Young John's face contorted for a moment… thinking. "Animal." He

replied. Bob hums in contemplation, "Four legs or two?"

John sighed and mumbled, "Two."

" Male or female?"

"Fe…."

Younger brother hoots and hollers, pointing his finger at his brother. "John's got a girlfriend!!"

Dad starts to laugh to himself as the brotherly brawl continues. "OK you two, get outta here, go get your sodas!"

****

By the position of the sun through the front shop window, Bob could tell the time. Another half hour and he would close the TV and Rock shop. The crew over at the gas station and deli will stay open for another 2 hours. As boss and owner, Robert G. Vallejos was ready to head home.

A mild headache had been plaguing him all afternoon. His father Frank's arrogance and jealousy was seeping into the wagging tongues of the community. All his life his father had belittled and berated his 'bastard son'. His mom was no better, calling him a queer and child molester. He never wanted to raise his family here in Trinidad…but now he was 'trapped'.

Escaping to the Army was the best road he could have taken. But the money hungry fingers of his parents hounded his every deployment. The Army ordered him to do horrible things in Korea. Then saw fit to strip him of his rank and deny him re-enlistment. When he returned to the U.S., the Army disavowed most of his overseas missions. Bob had a lot to be angry about.

****

Climbing the steps of the handsome 3 story Victorian, Bob could hear the loud boisterous laugh of his father Frank. His teeth clenched as he opened the front door to milling children. His sheepish wife, Nellie, trying to fend off the gregarious, inebriated arms of her father-in-law.

"Hey, Bobby, como esta?"

"Why are you here…" Bob scowled.

"I can see my grandkids when I want. What's it to you?!" Frank blustered, flailing a dismissive arm in his son's direction.

Nellie quickly waved at the children to follow her. She produced an old skeleton key from her apron. The kids immediately filed into the parlor, where Nellie securely locked the sliding pocket door.

The men's voices grew in volume.

Bob ordered his father from his home. A glass shattered, then a guttural laugh, followed by a slammed door. Nellie stood sternly before her husband, anticipating the wrath to come.

"WHY DID YOU LET HIM IN THE HOUSE!" Bob raged.

"You know he has a key! I couldn't stop him!" Nellie bristled as Bob shook her.

As Robert raged and Nellie cried, the frightened children took turns peering through the keyhole of the parlor door.

****

It was 1964 and everything had changed. Seven of the Vallejos children were under the control of the welfare department, until they aged out of the system. Nellie would have four more little ones; before the horrible revelation cancer had invaded her body. Tearful arrangements were made with Nellie's sister Sophie to adopt her two youngest daughters: Rebecca and Jennifer. Their last son, Sam (not his real name), became a preverbal football between Bob and Frank. The boy represented Bob's last chance to have a legacy…a namesake.

As Nellie completed her last pregnancy, the State Welfare stood ready to whisk the child away to prearranged protective custody.

"Right after Veronica was born, she was 'sold' by social services to people in Denver. (I had gone) to see Nellie in the VA hospital in Denver…no Veronica. (I drove back) to Trinidad at 2:00a.m., went to (welfare agent) Hinton's house, and threatened to break his neck. (I) bodily removed him from his home in shorts, took him to (the) Denver police and said, 'I wanted my daughter NOW!' Four hours later I got Veronica back. (I) took her (back) to Trinidad and asked Pano Ortiz if he'd adopt her…he said yes. Went to Judge Maybury who officiated papers to adopt her out. (I then) went back to Denver…. Nellie was dying."

Nellie Guerrero Vallejos died on the 31st of July 1967.

She was buried at Fort Logan's Veterans Cemetery.

Frank, Gertrude and Nellie's children did not attend her funeral at Fort Logan (near Denver). Bob was beside himself trying to place Veronica in a home, arrange Nellie's funeral and cover the businesses in his absence. By the time he finally got home to Trinidad; after saying good-by to Nellie; he couldn't get into his house. Strangers were in there! All the furniture was gone!

"They had already planned this, cause I was spending a lot of time (on Nellie's funeral)."

They stripped everything from the house and businesses.

"And with everything else, they took 150 gallons of gas, oil cans, everything out of the gas station. Emptied the deli and grocery store…till there was nothin. (Even) took the shelves. Everything I had in the shop, jewelry, lapidary equipment, you name it they took it. They even sold my car. I had nothing!"

The chief of police, old Dan Griego, kept a steely eye on Bob once he returned to Trinidad. Judge Maybury and local lawyers had no interest in hearing Bob's pleas for 'justice'.

Bob's world just evaporated.

(Personal Input)

Large families were not uncommon to those of devout religious beliefs. Large families thrived in a stable household, when they had support from their extended relatives. Kind words and a helping hand, fear of God and civic duty all help forge a sound upbringing for a child. The Vallejos had none of that. Every one of the Vallejos had a cross to bear. Frank had alcohol, Bob had PTSD, Gertrude had a sour heart towards her son, and Nellie had no control of her own body. (No birth control or divorce allowed.) Therefore, the children suffered.

(End Input)